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VERTEBRATE PEST CONTROL IN URBAN/SUBURBAN AREAS

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ABSTRACT: Urban/suburban vertebrate pest control problems present unique challenges because of the people-afflicted environment in which they occur. People are a major consideration in effective urban/suburban vertebrate pest control because of their emotions and changing values. Those responsible for today's vertebrate pest control must anticipate and consider this element of increasing importance and use it to their advantage rather than let it become a liability.

In the beginning, so-called vertebrate pests, along with other wildlife, depended upon the wilderness environment for their existence. Their shelter and food were provided through natural means, and a balance was maintained.

But then urbanization arrived and changed this natural environment. Conflicts developed between wildlife and these newly arrived immigrants. Gradually the urban developments became so intense they not only forced out much of the wildlife, they also caused many human inhabitants to move to the suburban fringes. Many of these people moved to the suburban areas to be a little closer to nature and the country. These very same people, however, quickly yelled "foul" when the native resident vertebrates did their thing. This is when the line was drawn between vertebrates and vertebrate pests--although, in many instances, I think the vertebrate pest title more rightly belongs to the urbanite.

Many of the vertebrate pest problems which will be alluded to in this conference are common to urban/suburban areas, but their controls are, in most cases, more difficult due to the constraints brought about by the urban/suburban environment of people, developments, vehicles, pets, and so forth. People are a major consideration in effective urban/suburban vertebrate pest control for a number of reasons. The primary reason is that emotions tend to run high in any kind of control program, especially when someone becomes aware of the program and is not informed about the need, safety, selectivity, and other factors concerning it. Another reason is that one person's vertebrate pest is another person's vertebrate pet, and the difference is often about as subtle as reversing the "T" and the "S". We have all encountered individuals who abhor agriculturalists using rodenticides but who, upon getting a gopher in their own garden, want to pour everything they can buy down that dirty, no-good blankety-blank's hole.

The answer to the people problem is to anticipate the reactions and emotions of people affected, either directly or indirectly, by control programs and use this to your advantage in mitigating unnecessary adverse reactions.

Vertebrate pest control problems everywhere are varied, challenging, often difficult, and a few times impossible, but when you add the constraints brought on by the urban/suburban environment, they become even more difficult.

I would like to discuss a few of the types of vertebrate problems I have encountered in urban/suburban areas and the climate they generated.

As I mentioned earlier, the pest/pet dilemma is sometimes a tough one, and the pigeons exemplify this difference in value ratings. The highlight of some people's day is to go out and feed the pigeons--which subsequently recycle the feed and give it back to someone else. This is where the problem starts. These birds, which are thoroughly enjoyed by many people, usually roost in such areas as trees overhanging parked cars, ledges over store front windows, in someone's attic, or in some other less than desirable location.

Fortunately, trapping is a relatively effective pigeon control method which normally can be used. Unfortunately, it can be quite high in terms of labor requirements, but this is usually offset by its safety, selectivity, and its low profile. Low profile might not seem to be an appropriate attribute in vertebrate pest control, but let me tell you something, low profile is a primary consideration in urban/suburban vertebrate pest control and is directly related to the element of human reactions. As an example, a California university undertook a toxic bait control program for their pigeon population after alternative methods were deemed inadequate. When a few dead birds turned up downtown over a holiday weekend and neither the local Fish and Game Agent nor anyone else who was available was aware of the program, the national wire services had the sky raining dead birds and the ground covered with prostrate birds--their feet straight up in the air and their eyes in the shape of little X's. Then Paul Harvey, our beloved syndicated radio commentator, picked it up and made sure everyone heard about it. This is not an example of a low profile operation. In fact, avian control people are still experiencing repercussions from this adverse publicity.

When trapping is utilized in pigeon management, it can be done discreetly in an area of limited access and exposure, and usually no one is even aware it is taking place. When the pigeon feeder in the park begins experiencing a decline in the number of birds he is feeding, he often as not attributes it to a competing pigeon feeder who has found a more attractive feed.

Pigeon trapping requires a dedicated effort to sufficiently reduce the population, and sometimes the problem isn't considered worth the effort. A local department store had a problem with pigeons loafing on its flat roof and were advised on how to make traps and carry out a trapping program. They were initially interested, but gradually decided it was too much effort. Shortly afterwards, during a heavy downpour which the drains (plugged by pigeon debris) could not handle, the roof collapsed causing over a hundred thousand dollars worth of damage--that would buy a lot of pigeon control.

Another bird problem of similar nature which we experienced in Santa Barbara is that of seagulls at our refuse transfer station--better known as the garbage dump. Because of the limited amount of available land right in Santa Barbara, our landfill disposal site is located a considerable distance away. Refuse is brought to a central suburban location in Santa Barbara and dumped by garbage trucks, homeowners, and others, and then reloaded into eighteen-wheelers for transfer to the landfill site. Between the time it is dumped at the transfer station and then reloaded for hauling away, all those choice morsels of garbage are exposed and literally fought over by the seagulls. Unfortunately, the seagulls, like the pigeons, recycle the food in what appears to be a less than random matter. In fact, the birds are highly respected by many who have to work regularly at the station for their bombing capacity and accuracy. This bird problem has so far evaded a satisfactory solution, although the effort and variety of techniques which have been attempted and suggested boggle the mind. I think it is sufficient to note that workers at the site now all wear hats.

Waterfowl are often a problem along California's coastal urban areas. These problems often are created by mankind moving into the waterfowl's habitat. A local mobile home park developer built a mobile home park around a natural lagoon, creating a very picturesque setting. The managers couldn't understand, however, when they planted a strip of lush green lawn around the edge of the water why the ducks came up and fed on it. They felt the ducks should stay in the water where they belonged. In this case the populace of the mobile home park, comprised of senior citizens, polarized into two camps of pro-duckers and anti-duckers, and our staff who worked on the problem felt like they were back in the Civil War. The answer to this particular problem was to replace the strip of natural grass with artificial grass which wasn't as attractive to the waterfowl and could be hosed clean of droppings.

Birds such as starlings, sparrows, linnets, and others, cause their normal urbanized problems of noise, dirt, droppings, smell, and mites. Local building inspectors, like those in many areas, have learned that come springtime starlings and sparrows are most useful in locating building flaws as these make ideal nesting areas.

Birds occasionally create situations reminiscent of Alfred Hitchcock's scenes in the movie "The Birds." An older residence, located right in the center of town on a quarter-acre site primarily landscaped with eucalyptus and pittosporum, became quite attractive to a group of migrating starlings each fall. After about three years, there was, by a conservative Audubon count, over 100,000 starlings coming in each night to use this poor lady's yard as a roosting site. The noise and filth generated was unbelievable, and in the middle of a residential neighborhood, totally intolerable. The birds broke limbs up to four inches in diameter. The electricity to the house was cut off because so many birds perched on the electrical wires that they broke. Neighbors throughout the area were complaining. The health department investigated and declared it a health hazard. Many of the cars which were regularly parked on adjacent streets had the paint eaten off where the birds had defecated on them. The lawn and ground covers were smothered. An adjacent mortuary was having to wash all their vehicles daily and threatened to send the bills to the lady. She decided to sell the place and get out, but the real estate salesman who brought the first potential buyer by made the mistake of showing the house at 4:30 p.m., just after the birds had staged and were coming in to the roost. Needless to say, that party didn't even make it into the house, and subsequent realtors refused to show it.

The possibilities for controlling this situation were severely limited by its location. Ironically, less than a mile away was a natural lake of several acres with a bountiful supply of cattails, the perfect roosting site for starlings according to all the experts except the birds. The plan was to acoustically alter this residential roost sufficiently to make the birds see the lake site as more favorable, and once they spent the night at the new location, they would be forever happy. For the better part of a week, acoustic devices were utilized at the site prior to the birds' arrival in the evening and continued until sufficient darkness was obtained to discourage most birds from flying. Great effort was taken to notify law enforcement officials and everyone in the area of what the problem was and what the strange noises were that they would be hearing. This was in anticipation of the human emotions element I mentioned earlier. These people really appreciated it, because when it resulted in nothing more than just pushing this 100,000 birds out of the quarter-acre site into all the surrounding neighborhood, they knew exactly who to blame.

The final solution to this problem was an expensive and drastic alteration of the landscaping sufficient to make the site unattractive to the starlings.

Rodents have always been a common urban/suburban vertebrate pest. So much has been said about most of them, especially ground squirrels, rats, and mice, that I don't want to spend time repeating it. Ongoing programs utilizing traps, anticoagulant baits, and exclusion are quite effective and well accepted in Santa Barbara. So many palm trees in Santa Barbara have metal bands around them to preclude rodents climbing up, that many people think the bands are some kind of cultural ornament. I might mention that the two years of drought have greatly intensified the influx of rodents and rabbits into the green oasis of suburbia. It has also given Fish and Game innumerable "Excedrin headaches" from the avalanche of deer depredation complaints.

We don't usually think of predators in the context of urban/suburban vertebrate pest control, but these, along with the other vertebrates, have acclimated quite well to the urban/suburban environment. In fact, while the prey might not seem as valuable, an owner gets just as excited and frustrated as the livestock producer when a bandit raccoon raids his reflection pool and cleans out his entire stock of goldfish. Or consider the owner of a new house who has just spent several thousand dollars landscaping his yard and comes out to find that skunks have dug up his new lawn in search of insects. Raccoons looking for food have literally rolled up into rolls of turf which has been recently planted in a new yard. Foxes, raccoons and opossums regularly feed on fruit and vegetables growing in people's yards and gardens. Fortunately, most of these can be relatively easily trapped in livetraps and relocated in remote rural areas.

Skunks are another common urban/suburban pest which we have to deal with continuously. Besides their undesirable odor and depredation to lawns and golf greens, they are a potential public health hazard.

In the summer of 1974, one of our trappers trapped a skunk in a livetrap set in the vicinity of Santa Barbara. Inasmuch as he had other traps to check before he returned to his vehicle, he placed a nearby board over the trap to shade the skunk from the warm midday sun. Upon returning, he removed the board from the top of the trap and noticed considerable moisture on the underside. He didn't think too much about it at first, but he began noticing that the skunk didn't act natural and recalled an open cut on his hand. Then he began to wonder whether that moisture had been condensation or saliva from the skunk. He decided to have the animal checked for rabies even though rabies had not been found for years in Santa Barbara. Well, it turned out the skunk was rabid and he had to undertake the painful series of rabies shots, all because he had been considerate enough to provide shade for an animal with only an hour to live. I mention this incident because it clearly shows two things about the human element in vertebrate pest control. One, that the people involved are not insensitive to wildlife and two, after it was established that there was an epidemic and that it presented a threat to their welfare, the public demanded increased control of wildlife in urban/suburban areas.

Not long before this, our predatory animal control program had been, shall we say, severely critiqued by a group of concerned citizens who felt that possibly we were doing some things which they felt were not necessary. Not only did the discovery of rabies silence the opposition to our control program, but immediately a number of emergency meetings with various state and county officials were held and funding was made available to almost double the size and scope of our program. Suddenly, we were the good guys. At one point we were getting calls for skunk control every time someone stepped out his door and smelled a skunk. Fortunately, we were able to successfully complete a skunk population reduction which, based on wildlife rabies monitoring, kept the epidemic from spreading, as evidenced in the sharply reduced human exposure to rabid wildlife. Although we are fortunate to be through the rabies emergency, we are not so fortunate in that we are again faced with a public who, like the general population everywhere, has a memory quickly diluted by time and not necessarily supportive of activities not directly benefiting them.

It's the same old story of whose ox is getting gored. Well, not many oxen are kept as pets these days, but a lot of suburbanites keep chickens, goats, sheep, and other pets. These have proven attractive fare for an increasing coyote population which will boldly come right into people's yards after them, and will also readily kill dogs and cats. They will also eat fruit, take food right out of a dog bowl, chew through hoses and plastic pipes, and make a general nuisance of themselves. In addition, many people hold a misbelief that coyotes will attack people, and this has resulted in people actually being held at bay in their own home by a coyote just crossing their yard.

Coyote control in urban/suburban situations creates a difficult problem because the local environment usually is loaded with obstacles such as pets, children, and livestock which eliminate just about all controls except livetraps, and anyone with any coyote experience knows the odds against livetrapping coyotes.

We have taken a three-pronged approach to this problem. First, with people who complain about coyotes but who are not experiencing actual damage or legitimate threat of damage, we explain that control is not justified, that the coyote isn't a threat to them, and that there is an aesthetic value to this type of wildlife in their area. Surprisingly enough, this candid approach is readily accepted by most people. Secondly, people who are actually experiencing coyote damage in a suburban area are informed of the complications and difficulties involved in control. We then try to delineate the coyote's range and look for a remote area within its range to conduct regular control operations. The third part of our approach is to develop new solutions to coyote control in urban/suburban situations. Two of our current projects are development of a caged livetrap which can be sufficiently disguised to capture at least the more ignorant coyotes, and the use of a variable electronic siren for eliciting responses from coyotes to assist in delineating their range where conventional control methods can then be conducted.

This brings up another control limitation in the urban/suburban environment, and that is noise pollution. The proximity of people to control activities often limits the use of acoustic devices for vertebrate pest control. For example, in Santa Barbara County we have had a tremendous increase in wine grape plantings, with many vineyards right adjacent to suburban residential areas. With acoustic devices a major method of bird control in grapes, we soon had a conflict not only between the grape-eating birds and the viticulturist, but the viticulturist and his neighbors. And believe me, it's tough enough fighting the birds, but at least they don't shoot back.

Before one such conflict had quieted down, the Sheriff's Office, The Health Department, The State Department of Food and Agriculture, The University of California, The Department of Fish and Game, The County Board of Supervisors, The County Farm Bureau, a local residential association, the Grape Growers Association, and our own office had all been involved.

I think you can see the common thread through all of these urban/suburban problems: That of people, their values and emotions. This is a common denominator in all vertebrate pest control operations, but in urban/suburban situations it is of even greater importance because of the greater exposure and impact these operations have on the public.

It has often been said that we could easily solve most vertebrate pest problems if it just weren't for people. This might be true, but it is a naive approach because people are an integral element in any vertebrate pest control operation.

Today those of us responsible for vertebrate pest control operations, whether conducted in urban/suburban situations or in remote agricultural areas, must anticipate and take into consideration this element of increasing importance and use it to our advantage, rather than let it become a liability.